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Erythrean Sea Trade: The Origin of Rome's Contact with China

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I

It is a common view that direct contact between the Western world (meaning the world of Western Europe) and that of the Chinese did not occur before the fourteenth century AD. The exploits of Marco Polo, and other explorers of his day, have overshadowed the feats accomplished in the classical world. However, a little known account, given in the *Hou-han-shu* [The Annals of the Later Han Dynasty], records that in AD 166 a Roman embassy reached the imperial Chinese court. Western scholars have cast doubt over this account, few outright denying its accuracy, while others dismiss the importance of the embassy. In light of modern scholarship on ancient south-east Asia, however, this paper will establish the legitimacy of the embassy by examining the trade between the Roman Empire and the East. This paper seeks to examine Chinese records within the historical frame of Indo-Roman trade with a view to establish its legitimacy and explain the purpose of the embassy and ascertain the route it travelled.

II

The *Hou-han-shu* was written sometime during the fifth century, but its information was centered on the period from 25 to 220.¹ This record shows that in 166 an embassy claiming to have been sent by the Emperor An-tun [Sinicized name of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (r. 161-180)] was received at the Chinese court.² The eighty-eighth chapter of the *Hou-han-shu* records that the Parthians had for generations blocked communications between Rome and China to carry on as a middle man in the prolific silk trade, but it only lasted "till the ninth year of the Yen-hsi period during the emperor Huan-ti's reign [=A.D. 166] when the king of Ta-ts'in [The Roman Empire], An-tun, sent

¹ F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into Their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966), 36.

² The Chinese knew Rome as Ta-ts'in. This name is most likely in reference to the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. Chinese historians would not have known that these regions were not directly under the rule of Rome. For a fuller account of the identification of Ta-ts'in with the Roman Empire see Hirth, 137 onwards.

an embassy who, from the frontier of Jih-nan [Annam] offered ivory, rhinoceros horns, and tortoise shell."³ This account has been controversial among western historians because there is no information about the embassy given in western records. This has led some historians to dismiss the account.⁴

Overland travel between Rome and China was almost impossible. Immediately east of the Roman border was Parthia, a country which was constantly at war with the Romans. Even during a time of peace between Parthia and Rome, it would have been very unlikely that the Parthians would have allowed an embassy to pass through their lands. The Chinese records show that the Parthians put considerable effort into blocking direct communication between Rome and China. The best example extant of this exists in the Chinese records. According to the *Hou-han-shu* in 97

[General] Pan Ch'ao sent Kan-ying as an ambassador to [Rome], who arrived in T'iao-chih [thought to be the area around the head of the Persian Gulf], on the coast of the great sea... the sailors of the western frontier of An-hsi [Parthia] told Kan-ying: 'The sea is vast and great; with favourable winds it is possible to cross within three months; but if you meet slow winds, it may also take you two years.'⁵

From what we know thanks to classical sources, it took a much shorter time to cross from Parthia to the Roman Empire than the quoted duration given to the Chinese by the Parthians. They were clearly lying to the Chinese embassy in order to stop them from reaching the Romans.

The Parthians never allowed Chinese merchants to travel all the way to the Roman Empire to sell their wares. Chinese merchants were stopped somewhere around

³ Hirth, *China and Roman Orient*, 42.

⁴ This skepticism is based on three problems: the feasibility of an embassy making its way from the Roman Empire to the China; the paltry tribute given by the embassy to the Chinese court; and thirdly why this embassy would have been sent, or, if it was a group of opportunistic merchants, as many historians claim without much explanation, why would they have desired to reach China.

⁵ Hirth, *China and Roman Orient*, 39.

Merv, the first large city they came to after crossing the Parthian border from China.⁶ It has always been recognized that the Parthians were doing this for economic reasons, as illustrated by another passage from the *Hou-han-shu*, which reads “the An-hsi [Parthians] wished to carry on trade with them [the Romans] in Chinese silks, and it is for this reason that they were cut off from communication [with the Chinese].”⁷

Assuming that an embassy from Rome could have made it through the hostile Parthian territory, the Turkic tribes west of China, whom the Chinese did their best to control, would, on many occasions, break from Chinese control, effectively closing the east-west trade routes across land. Because of these threats, the embassy of 166 was forced to find a different route. The maritime trading route between Roman Egypt and India was their only alternative. This route took the embassy from Egypt, to India, and eventually to Annam [roughly an area of southern Vietnam]. It was the region of Jih-nan [corresponding roughly to modern Vietnam] that the *Hou-han-shu* records as the approach whence the Roman embassy came to the Chinese court.⁸

III

Indo-Roman trade via the Indian Ocean has been investigated since the 1950s, pioneered by the researches of Sir Mortimer Wheeler and E. H. Warmington.⁹ An understanding the scale of Indo-Roman trade during the Roman Imperial Period is crucial to ascertaining the route the embassy to China took. Trading in the Indian Ocean between Rome and India greatly assisted their travels. Large scale Indo-Roman trade would indicate frequent contact between the two regions occurred, resulting in some level of

⁶ J. Thorley “The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, ‘Circa’ A. D. 90-130,” *Greece & Rome, Second Series*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1971): 75.

⁷ Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*, 42.

⁸ *Ibid.*.

⁹ Wheeler's original archaeological exploration of Arikamedu was the inspired much of the scholarship we know today. See also E. H. Warmington *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India* (London: Curzon Press, 1974). Both works are still considered definitive texts on the subject.

familiarity between the two cultures. Paltry Indo-Roman trade over the maritime route, on the other hand, would indicate that the embassy had difficulties traveling in this way. Indications that Indo-Roman trade was both important and lucrative during the early Imperial Period are, however, overwhelming.

Much of what we know about Indo-Roman trade has come to us through *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written in Greek by an anonymous author at an uncertain date. G. W. B. Huntingford gave the *Periplus* a rough dating between 95 to 130, but dates as early as AD 60 have been given by other historians.¹⁰ Huntingford's dating of the *Periplus* is interesting as it is close to the date of the embassy.¹¹

The *Periplus* gives us a detailed account of the travel and trade between the Roman Empire and the people of the Erythraean Sea. The trading partners of Rome stretch from the Egyptian ports on the Red Sea across the Indian Ocean to India. Using this maritime route, the embassy avoided all interference by the Parthians and other intervening peoples. According to the *Periplus*, the embassy began its journey to China from one of the two Roman-Egyptian ports on the Red Sea, Muos Hormos or Bernike. These are the two Egyptian ports given in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* as starting points for Roman merchants setting out towards the east.¹² To this point, the only example the embassy would have had to follow of Romans heading towards the East would have been the merchants of the Indian Ocean. The fifty-seventh chapter of the *Periplus* tells us that travel to India used to be “made in small ships by sailing round the

¹⁰ Anonymous, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, trans. G.W.B. Huntingford (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1980), 8-12.

¹¹ See Appendix I.

¹² *Periplus*, 19.

bays.”¹³ Sailing between the bays, however, was abandoned in favor of a direct route to India because of Hippalos who “discovered a route across the ocean. Since then, when the winds blow locally from the ocean according to season... some sail direct... to Barugaza or to Skuthia [cities on the west coast of India].”¹⁴

Not only did the maritime route divert the embassy around hostile peoples, but according to Pliny (23-79) it would have allowed it to reach India in just forty days.¹⁵ This meant that rather than taking the time to cross the approximate 2500 miles overland between the Empire and China, the embassy quickly sailed across the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ There is no way to accurately gage the time it would have taken to make this trek, but based on even the most simplistic understanding of ancient logistics leads one to the assumption that it would take more than forty days.

The discovery of this route, however, does not suggest that it was common knowledge, what does establish that this route was relatively common can be found in other sources. Pliny, in book VI of his *Natural History*, writes that “in no year does India drain our empire of less than five hundred and fifty millions of sesterces.”¹⁷ This account was published eighty-nine years before the embassy of 166 reached China, but it still provides a basic understanding of the volume of Indo-Roman trade. It is difficult to quantify the percentage of Rome’s total commerce that this constituted. Scholars have downplayed the significance of this sum, as the personal value of many Romans (some of the only relative economic information we have about this period) was not much shy of

¹³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴ Ibid., 52-53.

¹⁵ Sir Mortimer Wheeler, *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1954), 126.

¹⁶ Thorley, *Silk Trade*, 74.

¹⁷ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. John Bostock et al (Red Lion Court, Fleet Street: Taylor and Francis, 1855). I used a digitized version. See <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text.jsp?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D6%3Achapter%3D26> (accessed 20 May, 2009).

this figure.¹⁸ The problem with this assumption, however, is that the Romans were gaining something in trade which would retain its value, which they were not. The Romans were suffering an economic loss because they were trading gold and silver, the basis of the Roman economy, for perishable and consumer goods.¹⁹ This type of trade caused the Roman economy to lose strength, as it was being drained of its base value (metal currency) and being replaced by consumable goods. Even if Pliny's five hundred and fifty million sesterces was the value of a mid-rank nobleman, that wealth was, per annum, being drained out of Rome, never to return. By this interpretation of Pliny, then, his statement tells us that Indo-Roman trade flourished and adversely affected Rome's economy.

Strabo (63 BC – AD 24) also wrote about the volume of trade between Rome and India. According to his *Geography* (c. 7 BC – AD 23), while he accompanied Gallus in his prefecture of Egypt he observed approximately one hundred and twenty ships sailing, each year, to India.²⁰ Strabo's statement also implies that the amount of ships going to India per annum in his era is much greater than in the previous centuries.

The Indian presence in Egypt is another indication that Indo-Roman trade flourished during the opening centuries of the Christian era. Writing in the second century AD, Dio Chrysostom (c. 40-120) tells us that Indians constituted a settled population in Alexandria.²¹ This would suggest constant travel between Roman Egypt and India for trading purposes. The Indian merchants in Egypt left a record of their own.

¹⁸ Warmington, *Commerce Between Roman Empire and India*, 276.

¹⁹ See *Periplus*. As well, a second century papyrus found at Oxyrhynchus describes the cargo of a ship returning from the East as containing Gangetic nard, ivory, and textile, all limited-life consumables. For more see Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade: From pots to Pepper* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2008), 25.

²⁰ H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer, *The Geography of Strabo* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), 178.

²¹ Ajoy Kumar Singh, *Indo-Roman Trade* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 1988), 19.

An ostrakon found at Quseir (a port town on the Red Sea dating to at least the time of the Ptolemies) was written in the Brahmi script. The ostrakon appears to be a cargo list prepared probably in the second or third century AD as its script and language bear some similarities to inscriptions found at Nagarjunakona and Amaravati.²² Inscribed pottery found at Quseir-al-Qadim (just north of Quseir in Egypt) provides further proof of an Indian presence in Egypt. The graffitos found here are in the Tamil-Brahmi language, and appear to be two names, Kanan and “C(?)atan”. Palaeographic analysis dates these inscriptions to the second century AD.²³ Dio Chrysostom and the two Brahmi sources from Egypt indicate that Indo-Roman trade was lucrative enough in the second century AD that Indians were an acknowledged minority in Roman Egypt.

The *Periplus* speaks of approximately eight ports on the east coast of India through which trade with Rome was carried on. There seems to have been a Roman presence on the east coast of India. Because Roman merchants knew the east coast of India, they knew this area was well connected to lands further east. Even at the time of the *Periplus* the author knew that ships were crossing from the port of Limuriké, in India, to Khrusé (the west coast of modern Burma).²⁴ In the Roman view, the course from the east coast of India to southeast Asia provided the quickest route of travel. This is evident by an examination of Ptolemy’s (b. 90-168) *Geographia* (c. 150). The description of the far east given in the *Geographia* explains why the embassy chose the route they did. The map supplied in Appendix IIb is a thirteenth century reproduction of Ptolemy’s original

²² Richard Salomon, “Epigraphic Remains of Indian Traders in Egypt,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 111, no. 4 (1991): 732.

²³ Ibid., 734.

²⁴ *Periplus*, 54.

map.²⁵ The large island in the middle of the Indian Ocean (shown in the map) is Ceylon. Moving east from Ceylon, the Indo-Chinese peninsula juts into the sea. Beyond this is a bay, the intended destination of the embassy of 166. Sailing to this bay, the Gulf of Thailand, put the embassy right in the country Ptolemy called Sina (or China). The countries of Sina and Serica (seen at the extreme east of Ptolemy's map, south and north respectively) constituted China.²⁶ This means that the Romans believed they were sailing directly to the Chinese, rather than to the country of Jih-nan.

IV

Trade between eastern India and Southeast Asia facilitated the transit of the Roman embassy of 166. The members of the embassy knew that they could reach their destination by making use of the sea passage from eastern India to southeast Asia. The connection between eastern India and southeast Asia is first mentioned in the *Jatakas*, Buddhist religious scripture written sometime circa the fifth century BC. Book XXI: no. 539 of the *Jatakas* tells the story of a prince entering business by commissioning a ship to carry his merchandise and merchants to Suvarnabhumi.²⁷ The prince of this tale having the ability to commission a ship implies that there was already a maritime trading infrastructure in place.

Other Buddhist literature tells us that the profession of *mahanavika*, or the great mariner, was a respectable profession. Buddhist sentiments were not unique. Brahmi inscriptions found at Guntupalli and Ghantasala in Andhra speak of navigators and

²⁵ John Brian Harley and David Woodward, *The History of Cartography: Cartography in prehistoric, ancient, and medieval Europe and the Mediterranean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 80.

²⁶ Jules Toutain, *The Economic Life of The Ancient World* (Manchester: Ayer Publishing, 1979), 257.

²⁷ Himanshu P. Ray, *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 36. Suvarnabhumi implies southeast Asia, in a somewhat general way. The etymology behind this word implies that the Indians associated this region with gold and wealth.

maritime merchants.²⁸ R.C. Majumdar believed that trade was so important between India and southeast Asia that it was the origin of “intercourse in this region,” and that “it developed into regular colonization, and the Indians established political authority in various parts of the vast Asiatic continent that lay to the south of China.”²⁹ Obviously maritime trade with Southeast Asia was important to the early inhabitants of eastern India, and their intercourse was stable and continuous.

With the maritime trade routes from India to Indo-China well established by the second century AD, the Roman embassy easily reached Indo-China, but could they have then made contact with the Chinese? The area of Annam had been influenced by Chinese culture since the third century AD. This influence was so strong that around this time the countries of Annam and Tonkin began to pay tribute to the emperors of China.³⁰ As a tributary state of the Chinese empire, Annam had regular contact with emissaries and other officials from the Empire.

There is also evidence in Annam of a permanent Chinese presence. In the northern area of Annam, around Thanh-hoa, Janse, in 1938, investigated a number of Chinese sites, including Han dynasty (202 BC – AD 220) tombs.³¹ The tombs, a series of Han kilns were also discovered showing further signs of Chinese occupation.³² Thus it is reasonable to suppose that the Roman emissaries made contact with men of the Chinese empire at Annam.

²⁸ Ibid., 36-37.

²⁹ Ibid., 88.

³⁰ Olov R. T. Janse, “An Archaeological Expedition to Indo-China and The Philippines: Preliminary Report,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1941): 247-67.

³¹ Ibid., 4. Janse also identified urn tombs of this same dynasty in the area of Sa-huynh.

³² The possible Chinese occupation in this region did not end after the Han dynasty. Janse identified a number of Sung dynasty (960-1279) tombs in the region of Van-trai.

V

In spite of the absence of written records, archaeological evidence helps us get some reference to Roman contact with China. Countless excavations and amateur finds in India have led to the discovery of thousands of Roman coins on the subcontinent.³³ Many of the coins found in India were minted under the emperors from Augustus to Nero (c. 27 BC – AD 68), with the coins of Tiberius (r. 14-37) most heavily represented. Coins of Antoninus Pius (r. 138-161), his wife Faustina the Elder (100-c.141), and Marcus Aurelius, unlike their predecessors, are not evenly distributed throughout the subcontinent, rather, they have only been found at sites on the east coast (see appendix IIa). The distribution of these coins shows that Indo-Roman trade of the Antonine period focused on the east coast of India. With the focus of trade shifted to the east coast, Roman merchants developed a familiarity with this region.

Evidence in Egypt also links Indo-Roman trade of the second century to the east coast of India. The ostrakon found at Quseir discussed earlier was palaeographically dated to the second century AD. Salomon likens the script to inscriptions found at Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati.³⁴ Both of these cities are in the modern province of Andhra Pradesh. This is the area where most of the Antonine coins have been found.³⁵ Based on the epigraphic remains from Egypt, we know that people from eastern India were present, meaning that Roman links with that area of India were strong.

Other Roman goods found in the subcontinent show that the maritime route was preferred over the land route. Many of the Roman material remains found have come from the area around Pondicherry, in south-eastern India. Excavations in the middle of

³³ For an extensive list of Roman coin finds in India see: Singh, *Indo-Roman Trade*, 103-15. This work is invaluable for its catalogue of Roman coins.

³⁴ Salomon, *Epigraphic Remains*, 733.

³⁵ Compare appendix IIa to the location of these two cities.

the twentieth century unearthed approximately fifty sherds of Arretine ware and 150 sherds of amphorae. Roman glass and lamps have also been found at these sites.³⁶ The indication that the sea route was preferred, however, comes from the fact that northern India has yielded “no great quantity of goods.”³⁷ Wheeler believed that what limited items the northern regions produced were because of its use as an intermediary trade route between remote inland areas and the Indus Delta. Because of the scarcity of Roman finds in northern India, it is obvious that the maritime trade route was preferred.

The archaeological finds from a site known as Oc-eo in the Mekong Delta also yielded evidence of Roman presence in Annam. Oc-eo is only fifteen miles from the shores of the Gulf of Thailand, the landing point of the Roman embassy. Here, M. L. Malleret of the Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient found a series of stone buildings that represented a relatively advanced community. Among the finds of local artifacts were a number of Roman items. The most important of these, for the purpose of dating, were two coins, one of Antoninus Pius and the other of Marcus Aurelius.³⁸ The coin of Antoninus Pius was dated to 152, but that of Marcus Aurelius is too worn to give a positive date. These coins show, though, that there was a Roman presence, whether passing or consistent, in Annam. Other sources point to the possibility that there was a consistent exchange between Romans and the inhabitants of Oc-eo and its surroundings.

Malleret found a number of Roman beads along with the two Antonine coins. These beads were inscribed with images of Roman style: a cock on a chariot being drawn by four mice, a number of *grylli* (composite animals), and others with Roman style

³⁶ Wheeler, *Rome Beyond Imperial Frontiers*, 177-78.

³⁷ Ibid., 183.

³⁸ Ibid., 174.

busts.³⁹ Other remains found indicated that there was local bead production, as well, but there was a distinction made between the local works and the “obviously” Roman works. Malleret was so convinced of a Roman presence at Oc-eo that he wrote that his find “provide[s] the proof that during the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Christian era, the site of Oc-Eo produced artists who carved intaglios in the purest Roman style and were capable of reproducing its skilled techniques. This is not flotsam which has been swept by some distant current from the Western world and shored up here, lost on the extreme edges of a peninsula in the Asiatic world. These are the creations of an art incorporated into the domestic and social lives of the inhabitants of this land.”⁴⁰ If the indigenous people had began mimicking Roman artistic style a large quantity of Roman items passed through their port. While a permanent Roman inhabitation is unlikely, and there is no evidence that this occurred, Malleret’s observation is important as it shows that this area was not unfamiliar with Romans during the time of the embassy of 166.

Archaeological work done since Malleret has not unearthed other Roman finds from the second century, but has discovered other artifacts which help to further link Oc-eo to the overall Indian Ocean trading scheme. Many of the imported finds at the site are pottery remains from the second to fourth century. The pottery found here are the same in technique and style as those found at Indian sites closely associated with Indo-Roman trade, primarily that of Arikamedu.⁴¹ Arikamedu was the launching point for Indo-Roman trade research, and has, for some time, been the major point for archaeological research

³⁹ Ibid..

⁴⁰ Luce Boulnois, *Silk Road: Monks, Warriors & Merchants on the Silk Road*, trans. Helen Loveday (Geneva: Editions Olizane, 2003), 140.

⁴¹ Nancy Tingley, *Arts of Ancient Viet Nam: From River Plain to Open Sea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 109.

into the subject.⁴² A strong trade link between Oc-eo and Arikamedu, again, proves that the embassy of 166 easily made their way to Indo-China via the maritime trading routes of the Indian Ocean.

A Chinese record from the seventh century, the *Liang-shu*, retells much of the information given by the *Hou-han-shu*, in regards to Rome. This record retells the story of the embassy of 166 but, unlike in the *Hou-han-shu*, the author goes on to state that “[the] merchants of this country [Rome] frequently visit Fu-nan, Jih-nan [Annam] and Chiao-chih.”⁴³ The language in this passage is unclear, but it can be inferred that this information is meant to be read along with that of the embassy of 166. The *Liang-shu* is written in sections by period. There is no changing of the period (meaning date) written in the text between the story of the embassy and the statement about Roman merchant activity in Indo-China. Malleret’s thesis of a regular Roman presence in the Indo-China region is supported by this passage, and helps to further establish that this was the landing point for the embassy of 166 in Asia.

VI

Once the embassy reached the Chinese dignitaries in Annam, they were transported to the Chinese capital some distance to the north. Knowing that the embassy easily reached their destination is not the entire story though. What is just as intriguing about the embassy of 166 is who they were. The Chinese chroniclers use their word for embassy, which carries a political connotation, meaning that the emperor Marcus Aurelius sent them. But what motivation could the Roman emperor have had to do this? On the other hand, modern historians have immediately dismissed the embassy as an

⁴² Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade*, 135.

⁴³ Hirth, *China and Roman Orient*, 47.

enterprising group of merchants.⁴⁴ The embassy's tribute, given in the *Hou-han-shu*, is the source which many historians cite as evidence that they were not Imperial appointees. The evidence, however, does not point directly to the embassy being merchants, but after careful consideration, there is a distinct possibility that they were, in fact, appointed by the emperor.

The "paltry" tribute brought by the embassy caused a stir even in the fifth century when the *Hou-han-shu* was being written, ever since historians have used the short list of tribute to denounce the possibility that the embassy was Imperial.⁴⁵ This reason for doubting the embassy must be reconsidered. The three items given by the embassy as tribute are ivory, rhinoceros horns, and tortoiseshell. This is not an impressive list of tribute, as the writer of the *Hou-han-shu* points out, it lacks any gems or other ultra-precious materials. What these three categories of tribute represent, however, are items easily acquired over the journey to Annam, items that were light enough to be transported once the embassy reached land, and items that were still of a reasonable value.

Ivory was used throughout the ancient world as decoration. It was also an item that had a tendency to make its way over considerable distances while remaining in good condition.⁴⁶ The embassy would have chosen to bring ivory as tribute, knowing that in their own country it was a major import, thinking that the Chinese court would use it just as Romans would. As well, the stop before the embassy crossed the Bay of Bengal to Indo-China from India, in the land of Masalia, there was a special type of ivory known as

⁴⁴ Numerous authors dismiss the account as an enterprising group of merchants. For a general view of this explanation please see *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 1*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

⁴⁵ According to the *Hou-han-shu* "[the] list of their tribute contained no jewels whatever, which fact throws doubt on the tradition." Hirth, *China and Roman Orient*, 42.

⁴⁶ A prime example of the transportability of ivory is the Indian ivory statue found at the site of Pompeii. See Wheeler, *Rome Beyond Imperial Frontiers*, 135.

bosare.⁴⁷ A positive identification of this type of ivory is impossible, but the hypothesis purported by Yule and Burnell is very likely, that is that bosare was ivory from the black elephant.⁴⁸ Not only was this ivory useful, but it was also a minor rarity, and represented a moderately valuable item, rather than a haphazard choice.

Rhinoceros horns were not an invaluable item in the ancient world. To the Romans this was a powerful aphrodisiac, while to the Chinese it was an important medicine which was used to reduce fever and inflammation. This item was found at ports throughout the Indo-Roman trade route, and was another light item which the embassy could easily transport.⁴⁹ As well, although the *Periplus* does not explicitly mention a port close to Indo-China which sold rhinoceros horns, the scientific record shows that it was available.⁵⁰

Tortoiseshell was another product easily obtainable throughout the Erythraean Sea. Like ivory, it is used as decoration in both the West and the East. Romans especially fancied it for inlays and backings of items such as hairbrushes. The tortoiseshell found in Indo-China is described by the *Periplus* as being the “best tortoiseshell of all places on the Erythraean Sea.”⁵¹ With this being the case, the embassy would easily chose this tortoiseshell as an item of tribute.

These items of tribute were chosen for their transportability and quality as well as their practicality. All three tributes given to the Chinese were items that could have been used by a culture at any point of development. This was important because the Romans

⁴⁷ *Periplus*, 55.

⁴⁸ Henry Yule and H. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, and of kindred terms, etymological, historical, geographical and discursive* (London: John Murray, 1903), 489.

⁴⁹ For a list of ports exporting rhinoceros horn see *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.

⁵⁰ Marshall Cavendish Corporation, *Endangered Wildlife and Plants of the World* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 2001), 1185.

⁵¹ *Periplus*, 55.

had no idea how developed the Chinese were. Some of the only information the Roman sources tell about China is given in the *Periplus*. The account given is of a migratory people who annually bring goods to the border of “Thina” [China].⁵² The actions of these people are not the actions of a developed civilization. Because of the lack of Roman knowledge about the Chinese, the embassy and their patron did not know the nature of an appropriate tribute. Most likely they were influenced by the local peoples of Annam, which was a tributary state to China. An example of the tribute given to the Chinese from this region is given in the *Hou-han-shu*, which records that a rhinoceros was sent in tribute in the year AD 2.⁵³ From an example like this, the Roman embassy believed that the Chinese would be more appreciative of practical tribute, such as those which they brought. Another explanation to the tribute lies with the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Aurelius was a shrewd emperor and deplored expansion of the Imperial treasury. Because of this, he did not give the embassy a limitless budget for tribute.⁵⁴ There was no reason to send an extremely pricey tribute to the Chinese court if this mission was intended to simply be the first of many between the two empires.

If the embassy had been simply a group of enterprising merchants, as some would have us believe, why would they have taken any tribute with them? The tribute items were not trinkets or novelties brought from Rome by the embassy, but were purchased on the way to China. Merchants would have had the funds to not only purchase these items, but also to secure passage to Indo-China. A group of merchants, also, would have had no reason to journey to the Chinese court. Chinese goods were already transported

⁵² Ibid., 56.

⁵³ Denis Franke et al., *The Cambridge History of China* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 453.

⁵⁴ For a life of Marcus Aurelius see Anthony Birley, *Marcus Aurelius* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966).

directly to both east India and to Indo-China, areas in which Roman trading already occurred. There would have been no advantage to merchants spending the time and money to reach China. The Imperial government had more plausible reasons for sending an embassy to the Chinese court.

The early years of the reign of Marcus Aurelius saw a major conflict with Parthia. Roman penetration into Parthian territory began in 165, when general Gaius Avidius Cassius crossed the Euphrates and moved into the area of Osroene. The Imperial army marched as far into Parthian territory as Ctesiphon, the site of the royal palace. At this point of the war, however, the Roman armies were running out of supplies and being devastated by disease and the absolute destruction of Parthia was prevented. Because of this forced retreat, Marcus Aurelius was looking for another means of defeating the Parthians. He knew that there were no other comparable empires, except possibly that of China.⁵⁵ The embassy to China, therefore, was an attempt by Marcus Aurelius to make an anti-Parthian alliance. After the first incursion into Parthia, Marcus again ordered an invasion later in 166, which penetrated all the way to Media.⁵⁶ Because of this second invasion, it is likely that Marcus was looking to the Chinese as a possible ally in a war against Parthia.

A second possible motivation for Marcus Aurelius to send an embassy to China lies in his personal nature. Aurelius is known as the philosopher emperor. He was an intellectual before anything. Marcus subscribed to the philosophy of the stoics. As any philosopher, he was constantly in search of knowledge through reason and logic. The one

⁵⁵ Marcus Aurelius might have been aware of China as an empire, although it is uncertain at best. What information he would have had about China would have been brought by either Indian embassies or Roman merchants returning from the East.

⁵⁶ Birley, *Aurelius*, 195.

area of the world in which Romans could not claim the preeminent knowledge was that of the Far East. It is practical, then, to say that Marcus was motivated to send the embassy of 166 in order to gather more knowledge.

Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius had more motivation and capital to send the embassy in 166 to the Chinese court than an independent group of merchants. Whether this embassy was meant to begin creating an alliance between Rome and China or simply to gather knowledge about China is not certain. Nevertheless it seems reasonable to speculate that the Roman embassy of 166 was intended to open up some sort of connection with Imperial China. The embassy used the maritime trading route between Roman Egypt and India, and then to Indo-China, to reach Chinese territory. This route was familiar by 166 and took the embassy around the hostile territory of the Parthians and the rouge Turkic tribes of Central Asia. Once the embassy reached Indo-China, it passed into the territory of the Chinese who promptly accepted the embassy, as they had for a long time wished to open communications with the Romans.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ See page 2 above.

Appendix I

Huntingford's dating of the *Periplus* as between 95-130 seems to be useful for this narrative. His calculations are as follows. First, Pliny's *Naturalius Historia* (AD 77) stops in its description of East Africa before that of the *Periplus*. To Huntingford, this indicates that Pliny did not have access to the *Periplus*. The second document used to establish a later date for the *Periplus* is Ptolemy's *Geographia*, which describes seven more ports past Mosullon than the *Periplus* does. Thus Ptolemy postdates the *Periplus*.

Appendix IIa



The red crosses on this map of India map the locations of Antonine coins; those of Antoninus Pius, Faustina the Elder, and Marcus Aurelius.

The original map is ©www.indiamapxl.com The addition of the mapping of Antonine coin finds was provided by the author.

Appendix IIb



This thirteenth century map based on the writings of Ptolemy shows the Roman perception of the world around AD 150. This was the world in which the embassy of 166 was travelling.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PtolemyWorldMap.jpg> (accessed 20 May, 2009).

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